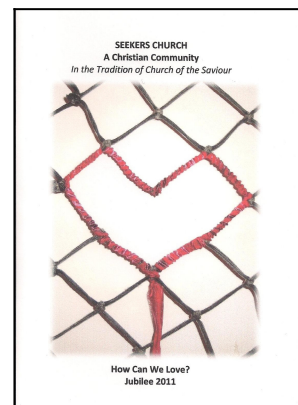


# “All Saints Day” by Marjory Bankson

6 November 2011



## The 21st Sunday After Pentecost

Today is All Saints Day, the first Sunday in November. It's a day to remember those who have died in our community and to think about the gift of life that is ours today.

I grew up thinking that saints were either Christian martyrs who died horrible deaths or people who made miracles happen. Then I realized that the Bible regards any Christian as a saint – someone who is consecrated or dedicated to God. Here at Seekers, I would say that our membership commitment is enough to qualify you as a saint because it puts us on a path to be intentional about our quest for God.

As the first hymn tells it, “They loved their God and they lived that love. It was loving that made them strong...The world is filled with living saints who choose to do God's will. You can meet them in school, on the road, or at sea, in a church, in a train, in a shop, or at tea: for the saints are folk like you and like me, and I mean to be one too.”

Dick Busch told me a wonderful story about that hymn. Back in the late 80s, the Episcopal church was revamping its' hymnbook and two members of the VTS faculty were on the national committee. They had just come back from a meeting in New York to decide which of the current hymns would be kept, so the Dean asked them to speak with the students about their deliberations. One of them, who was a fine musician, said proudly that they had eliminated "that trite little piece, 'I Sing a Song of the Saints of God.'"

"No! No!" the students shouted from various places in the refectory. Indeed, the commotion and the comments were so strong that their reaction was reported to the hymn selection committee and it was kept in the next hymnbook after all.

Why did the students want to keep that hymn? Unlike many hymns, this one makes me smile. It's lilting and singable. And these saints are like you and like me. In fact, I think this little gem is an antidote to the notion that to be a saint, one must be like Mother Theresa. The song captures an important piece of our theology. Maybe it would be more accurate to identify saints as those who want to live out of love rather than fear, even when it's a struggle.

This year, the Living Water Mission Group has added three new tiles to our memory wall. Two died some years ago, but we have just recently identified their dates. The third is Kate Cudlipp, who died this year. And today, I want to honor them as saints because, each in their own way, they sought the face of God in this community.

**The first is Mary Youry**, who was born in 1924 and died in 1996. She came to Seekers about 1984, when she was 60 years old and out of work. She had been a journalist, tough-talking and critical. She owned an apartment on Columbia Road and first came to Potter's House where she acted in plays produced by the Kerygma group. I don't know why she came to Seekers, but she found a home here. I flinched when she joined the Learners & Teachers mission group, where her angry search for faith and friends

made our work harder. Sometimes it was a real challenge to love Mary. She could be caustic, quick to take offense and slow to forgive. But I also remember how she introduced David and me at her mother's funeral, as though we were her family – because we were.

One night as we gathered for mission group, Mary fell down three stairs into the back hall at 2025. We gathered her up, took her to the GW emergency room and met in the waiting area while the doctors checked her out for a concussion. She was okay that time, but when she became more disabled and needed nursing care, Rachel Halterman took on the task of visiting Mary regularly for the mission group and for Seekers. When she died, David Lloyd took on the thankless job of processing Mary's estate because it needed to be done and she was family. Now we honor Mary as a saint and seeker. She stretched our limits on loving. [light candle]

**The second is Don Jernigan**, who was born in 1945 and died in 1993. Don was a Presbyterian pastor in Arlington while Juanita and their girls, Lillie and Elizabeth, attended Seekers. We still see them here at Christmas dinner when they come to reconnect with other alumni. Don came to a number of Faith At Work events when I was the president there. When FAW was searching for office space in northern Virginia, Don was eager to have us locate in his church. But Don was a troubled man, living separately from his family, and he took his own life. Bob Bayer, who was on the Servant Leadership Team at that time, went with Juanita and found him dead. Peter, who was also on the SaLT then, led the memorial service and poured Don's ashes into Lake of the Saints at Dayspring. Now we honor Don as a saint and seeker. He too taught us more about how to love. [light candle]

**The third is Kate Cudlipp**, who was born in 1943 and died in 2011. Kate first came to Seekers in 1982, when she was 39 and just beginning her relationship with Carole. She was cautious about revealing her sexual orientation to us and did that one person at a time, as she felt her way into the community here. Once she knew this was a safe place, Kate offered her search for God and her lawyerly skills freely. In 1991, Seekers commissioned Kate to represent us at a convocation of gay and lesbian Christians and then in 1993, Kate was confirmed as part of the Servant Leadership

Team, along with Sonya and Peter.

Kate's leadership and her servanthood touched many of us directly and indirectly. Her bicycle accident last summer was a shock to all of us and her decision to have the ventilator removed, knowing it would result in her death, has prompted many of us to join the Five Wishes class where we can think about our own choices around dying. Now we honor Kate as a saint and a seeker. She showed us many ways to love and, in her own way, challenged us to think about death and resurrection – what we will be celebrating at the communion table this morning.

[light candle]

I hope you will take some time after the service to look at the memory wall in the back stairwell and offer a prayer for these three saints whose lives are entwined with ours.

**The gospel reading** appointed for this All Saints Day is from Matthew, chapter 5: the beatitudes. Cynthia Borgeault, in her provocative book, *Wisdom Jesus*, considers this text as the essence of Jesus' way. Think about the three saints that I have described today as you listen to this litany of blessing:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Borgeault says that the "poor in spirit" are those who come with empty hands and softened egos, ready to receive. Those who mourn practice the deep vulnerability of love. Both are promised the reward of enlightenment, completion, ultimate peace.

The next two beatitudes really focus our attention on the nature of God as one who calls us home with great love and tenderness far beyond what any earthly parent

could provide.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Borgeault defines meekness as those who have been gentled by love. Those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” are those who long for God. Jesus promises that “they will be filled.” These two promises sound a lot like the God of Revelation as one who will welcome the faithful and wipe away every tear – as a mother might.

Now we come to the centerpiece of the beatitudes:

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

By placing mercy at the center of the beatitudes, Matthew conveys the core of Jesus’ teaching. If we are to love God and love our neighbors, then mercy or forgiveness is the key that unlocks our lives. In that context, we can understand that the “pure in heart” means our desires are not divided among little gods and many things. Purity here means singleness of purpose, focus and intentionality. Jesus says “They will see God.” Only then can we peacemakers without being power-brokers, without forcing people into passivity.

Then the last two beatitudes, like the first two, hold out promises to those who are learning to love beyond the normal human boundaries of family and tribe.

- Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

- Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you ... on my account ... for your reward is great in heaven.

Borgeault reminds us that situations of persecution or failure can lead us toward freedom IF we can let go of our ego-need to be right or to be in control. I think of Nelson Mandela here. For his activism against apartheid in South Africa, he was sentenced to a lifetime in prison. After 27 years on Robben Island, he was finally released and could have come back in bitterness and regret. Instead, he set aside his personal loss and led his people in an amazing reconciliation process.

In these blessings or beatitudes, Jesus outlines a path of radical transformation through a posture of inner receptivity and outer practice.

How then do we learn how to love one another as much or as little as we love ourselves? By engaging as deeply and honestly as we can; by examining ourselves for resentments as a clue to old hurts that need to be healed. I believe that our capacity for love grows in a thousand small interactions. Each time we stop, look, listen and let love flow we are bringing God's realm into this time and place. And each time we kill another's hope or turn away from knowing another's need, we exercise our free will to sin and short-circuit the Spirit's flow among us.

The beatitudes are not a prescription for sainthood. They are simply a description of what it means to live with an awareness of God-with-us in our present circumstances. When we gaze into the face of another, we can see the face of God if we are looking – and the search is what brings us together here at Seekers, around the communion table.

We do indeed sing a song of the saints of God.

“They loved their God and they lived that love. It was loving that made them

strong... You can meet them in school, on the road, or at sea, in a church, in a train, in a shop, or at tea: for the saints are folk like you and like me. God help me to be one too."

Amen.